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Article

## The Pitfalls of “Love and Kindness”: On the Challenges to Compassion/Pity as a Political Emotion

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### Abstract

Martha Nussbaum’s political theory of compassion offers an extensive and compelling study of the potential of employing compassionate emotions in the political realm to further social justice and societal “love”. In this article, two pitfalls of Nussbaum’s affirming theory of a politics of compassion are highlighted: the problem of a dual-level hierarchisation and the “magic” of feeling compassion that potentially removes the subject of compassion from reality. I will argue that Hannah Arendt’s thoughts on pity provide substantial challenges to a democratic theory of compassion in this respect. Following these theoretical reflections, I will turn to Hillary Clinton’s 2016 US-American presidential election campaign, to her video ads “Love and Kindness” in particular, in order to provide fitting illustrations from current *realpolitik* for these specific pitfalls of the political employment of compassionate emotions.

### Keywords

compassion; emotions; Hannah Arendt; Hillary Clinton; Martha Nussbaum; pity

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### 1. Introduction

To claim that political emotionality was prevalent during the 45th presidential election in the United States would certainly be an understatement. Donald Trump’s powerful play with people’s anger, fear, and insecurities, coupled with his aggression (most notably directed against immigrants and women and the female body), his arousal of patriotism, and the successful emotional creation of the illusion of belonging to a well-defined community, has not only left a distinctive mark in the history of US elections but is already eagerly discussed in scholarly thought about emotions<sup>1</sup> in politics (e.g.,

Fording & Schram, 2017; Tucker, 2018; Valentino, Wayne, & Oceno, 2018).

However, Donald Trump was not the only candidate who was pressing emotional buttons in order to enforce his political vision during the election campaign. Trump’s political adversary, the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, was also trying to address, visualise, and arouse emotions, although of a different nature: throughout her campaign, Clinton was relying on “love” and compassion. One example that perfectly illustrates this strategic employment and fostering of compassionate emotions both as a political means and a political end is the campaign video ad titled “Love and Kindness”, released in April 2016<sup>2</sup>,

<sup>1</sup> When referring to “emotions” I am concerned with phenomena which can be attributed to the subjective perception that one “is moved” by something, a sensation that is usually directed towards a specific object. I use the term in a broad sense, thus leaving room for variations in terms of the cognitivist and/or phenomenological content of these phenomena, but distinguishing them from pre-conscious affects (e.g., Leys, 2011, p. 443). The phenomena I am concerned with can occur in the public realm (this aspect is crucial in that Arendt draws a clear distinction between private “passions” and public “emotions”, as we shall see later). By using the term “emotions” in this way, I am able to accommodate both Martha Nussbaum’s (explicit, consistent, and extensively defined) and Hannah Arendt’s (more vaguely defined) terminology in the comparison of the two theories.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/hillary-clinton-love-and-kindness-campaign-2016/2016/04/26/dc360c68-0b62-11e6-bc53-db634ca94a2a\\_video.html?utm\\_term=.b0f942d45e59](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/hillary-clinton-love-and-kindness-campaign-2016/2016/04/26/dc360c68-0b62-11e6-bc53-db634ca94a2a_video.html?utm_term=.b0f942d45e59)

and a modified version under the same title that was uploaded onto Clinton's official YouTube channel several days before election day<sup>3</sup>. These two 60-second video clips show Clinton on the campaign trail, apparently attempting to display her emotional involvement with citizens and peers (women especially, but also children and families), addressing her audiences with lots of *pathos*, in the spirit of compassion. "I know it sometimes seems a little odd for someone running for president to say: 'We need more love and kindness in America'. But I am telling you, from the bottom of my heart, we do", Clinton is depicted declaring in the latter of the two ads. It is thus apparent that Clinton and her team had explicitly designated compassionate emotions as both worth striving for the future of the US-American society (political end) and as one of the basic instruments for her campaign and a potential presidency (political means). "From the bottom of my heart", furthermore, explicitly points us to the fact that Clinton sought to convey emotional authenticity and "warmth" in her political agenda. This is not surprising, given the fact that Clinton has widely been perceived as cold-hearted and "robot-like" (e.g., Cunha, 2016), thereby revealing the unsettling continuation of powerful gender stereotyping for women in politics.

Clinton's focus on compassionate emotions as both political means and political end in her electoral campaign reminds us, to some extent, of Martha Nussbaum's political theory of emotions (e.g., Nussbaum, 1996, 2001, 2013, 2016). Nussbaum promotes compassion as a useful and vital emotion to be employed in the political realm in order to advance social justice and more collective striving towards an Aristotelian version of the "good life", arguing that compassion, and public "love", help overcome tendencies of societal exclusion and providing support for the sacrifices which are needed for the common good.

In the following analysis, I will briefly outline Martha Nussbaum's political theory of compassion. I will then continue to problematise certain aspects of her normative recommendation to further compassion as both a political means and a political end with the help of another political theory of compassion/pity, the one Hannah Arendt proposed in *On Revolution* (1963/2016). It will become clear that Nussbaum's very affirming account of the potential of compassion in the political realm and her vision of a "public culture of compassion" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 157) are in fact at risk at generating substantial threats for a democratic understanding of politics—due to two specific pitfalls, namely the problem of a dual-level hierarchisation and the "magic" of feeling compassion that potentially removes the subject of compassion from reality. These underlying problems in Nussbaum's proposal might eventually undermine the exact values this compelling project was originally designed to promote.

After discussing these two challenges to Nussbaum's proposal of a compassionate "emotion-driven politics" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 396) I will turn to Hillary Clinton's

presidential campaign which ran under the slogan "Stronger Together". I will argue that the two aforementioned campaign video clips are telling illustrations of the pitfalls of a politics of compassion. Obviously, the discussion of Nussbaum's and Arendt's theories in this respect does not explain Clinton's electoral defeat. It is neither my aim to provide a detailed analysis of the Democratic presidential campaign, nor do I seek to offer an extensive study on the myriad of possible reasons why it had failed at the ballot box. Instead, despite—or, rather, because of—their being one-dimensional and pointed due to their very purpose, Clinton's campaign videos fittingly illustrate my claim that a critical engagement with Nussbaum's theses with the help of Arendt's is fruitful and vital for further theoretical reflections on both the potential and dangers of employing compassion/pity as a political emotion.

## 2. The Potential of a "Public Culture of Compassion"

Election campaigns such as Hillary Clinton's are certainly not the only instances in which we can detect emotion in political life. Reflections on the role of emotion and affects in the political realm have increasingly been published over the last two decades, for particular emotions and with specific research foci (e.g., Ahmed, 2014; Arrifin, Coicaud, & Popovski, 2016; Demertzis, 2013; Engelken-Jorge, Güell, & Del Rio, 2011; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; Hoggett & Thompson, 2012; Marcus, 2000; Walzer, 2004; Westen, 2007; Wodak, 2015). However, although compassionate emotions had once been prominent elements in influential political thought, for example in the political theories of David Hume, Adam Smith, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and although compassion/pity and empathy are now increasingly emphasised and valorised in neoliberal terms (Hochschild, 1983; Illouz, 2007; Pedwell, 2014; Rifkin, 2009)—despite this, (female connoted) compassionate emotions still seem to have to prove their worth both for (male connoted) *realpolitik* and current mainstream political science alike (notable exceptions are, e.g., Berlant, 2004; Pedwell, 2014; Ure & Frost, 2014).

In light of this research gap, Martha Nussbaum's extensive studies on the relationship between compassionate emotions and politics (1996, 2001, 2003, 2013) have attracted much scholarly attention. Nussbaum argues that emotions, in general, are not only ever-present in politics but that we should also think of strategies to actively *employ* certain kinds of emotions in order to create a more just society. She writes: "All political principles, the good as well as the bad, need emotional support to ensure their stability over time, and all decent societies need to guard against division and hierarchy by cultivating appropriate sentiments of sympathy and love" (Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 2–3).

Nussbaum singles out one of the most promising, "positive and helpful" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 135) emo-

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-iuPeMdprQ>

tions for stabilising “decent” societies and political systems (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 3): compassion<sup>4</sup>. Nussbaum defines compassion as “a painful emotion directed at the serious suffering of another creature or creatures” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 142). However, compassion, for Nussbaum, is not only a “private” emotion but very much a “collective” one: compassion can serve as a “bridge between the individual and the community” (Nussbaum, 1996, p. 28). It is this bridge that needs to be erected first, though, because Nussbaum acknowledges the fact that compassion, by its very nature, can be partial (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 157). This means that I might only feel compassion towards those who are literally nearest and those who, through familial or cultural ties, are dearest to me. In her programmatic and normatively charged study *Political Emotions* (2013), as a political end, she thus calls for a widening of our own very narrow circle of concern up to the national level, through education (p. 124) and through a compassionate culture that promotes shared encounters, especially in specifically designed public places (p. 261). As a political means, she demands that compassion be “practiced” in schools and beyond, with the help of literature (Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 276–279, 1995, p. 10) and role play (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 176). Furthermore, politicians and other political agents should actively address and evoke compassion for fellow citizens in matters of social justice. This could be achieved with the help of imagery (Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 283–284), for example, or moving and compassionate political speeches such as Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address (Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 229–234).

Meanwhile, legislation and jurisdiction, according to Nussbaum, have to be set up according to impartial principles (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 20), the support of which could also be furthered by her rather daring vision of a “public culture of compassion”. Indeed, much of Nussbaum’s account reads almost like a political utopia, which she claims to contain a very real potential for current political practices (Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 383–385). However, this alleged realistic nature of Nussbaum’s various ideas for how to foster “positive” emotions in a given society has been met with some scepticism. Veronika Vasterling, for instance, has criticised Nussbaum’s focus on civic education through literature as being too unrealistic and sterile for a world that is actually much less coherent than Nussbaum allegedly gives credit for, a world which is based on the very “messy business” of interacting with the other (Vasterling, 2007, p. 90).

It is thus necessary to critically examine Nussbaum’s claims with regard to the *limitations* of the “public culture of compassion”. In the following analysis, I aim to highlight two specific challenges to Nussbaum’s normative proposal. I will demonstrate that one of the best ways of doing so is to employ Hannah Arendt’s po-

litical theory for this task (see also Degerman, 2016, pp. 17–18). An extensive and systematic comparison of the two theoretical explorations of (compassionate) emotions in politics has not yet been undertaken, even though some (rather) recent studies have provided brief and partial analyses of the two theories in this respect (e.g., Degerman, 2016; Roberts-Miller, 2007; Rosenmüller, 2015).

### 3. (Arendtian) Challenges to Compassion/Pity as a Political Emotion

The fact that both theories have yet to be systematically subjected to comparison is probably due to the impression that Arendt and Nussbaum offer very different views on the role of emotions in politics in general, as well as very different views regarding the “positive” and dangerous political effects compassion/pity might have<sup>5</sup>. Arendt has neither written about emotions extensively, at least not as extensively as Nussbaum, nor is she of the opinion that emotions should belong into the political realm at all (e.g., Arendt, 1963/2016, p. 91), a crucial point which she emphasises throughout her oeuvre. Arendt’s theory is thus not the first choice to consult whenever one wishes to engage in a political theory of emotions, although some publications have sought to illuminate the role of (particular) passions/emotions in her political theory (e.g., Degerman, 2016; Heins, 2007; Lang, 2015; Newcomb, 2007; Swift, 2011).

Much of that which manifests Arendt’s most well-known stance on emotions in politics can be found in her study on the French and the American Revolution. Arendt’s deliberations in *On Revolution* (1963/2016) constitute a significant and comparatively extensive account on what happens when (compassionate) emotions are employed as a political means to a specific political end. Even if her thoughts revolve around the context of revolutions, it is clear from the content of other accounts in which she touches the issue of passions and emotions, notably *The Life of the Mind* (1978), *Men in Dark Times* (1968), and *Rahel Varnhagen* (1957/1997), that her remarks on pity as a political emotion can be extended to other, non-revolutionary political settings as well.

These deliberations serve as fruitful arguments against some of Nussbaum’s very affirming claims of the potential of evoking compassion in the political realm. As a conceptual preliminary remark it must be said that if one is to bring Nussbaum’s and Arendt’s political theories of compassion/pity into any dialogue, it needs to be clarified that Arendt makes a twofold distinction between the private “true” “passion” of compassion, which marks a direct reaction to individual and concrete suffering (Arendt, 1963/2016, p. 85), and the political “perversion” (Arendt, 1963/2016, p. 84) of such passion into

<sup>4</sup> Compassion, according to Nussbaum, is not the same as empathy, which she defines as the “ability to imagine the situation of the other, taking the other’s perspective” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 145), which is neither necessary nor sufficient for compassion (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 146).

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Nussbaum herself refrains from referring to Arendt’s theory throughout her work on political emotions, except from her brief rebuttal of Arendt’s *Reflections on Little Rock* (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 316), and her engagement with Arendt’s analysis of Augustine’s concept of love (Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 551–556).

pity, thus turning into a public “sentiment”. This pity, being “sorry without being touched in the flesh” (Arendt, 1963/2016, p. 80), is able to “reach out to the multitude” (Arendt, 1963/2016, p. 84), and it can deliberately be evoked in the public realm in order to address a collective. Arendtian pity as a public sentiment can thus serve as the equivalent to Nussbaum’s political emotion of compassion—despite the difference in terminologies and the widely diverging conceptual notions they attribute to this collective phenomenon.

In *On Revolution*, Arendt provides several reasons for her vehement warnings against using pity as both a political means and/or a political end—warnings that stress the proto-totalitarian potential of pity as a public emotion (Arendt, 1963/2016, p. 96). Due to the brevity of this article, I can neither provide a detailed rendition of the general characteristics she assigns to pity, nor of all the reasons she gives for ascribing to pity not an apolitical, but an *anti-political* character (see also Newcomb, 2007, p. 117) according to the Arendtian notion of that which manifests “the political”. I would like to focus on two major issues which Arendt has with pity which help us challenge Nussbaum’s very affirming notion of a “public culture of compassion”: the problem of hierarchisation and the “magic” of feeling compassion and its relation to reality.

### 3.1. Dual-Level Hierarchisation

Let us first consider the issue of hierarchy, which brings us to a striking paradox in Nussbaum’s theory: conceptually, Nussbaum explicitly tries to stay clear of any notion of a hierarchy that might be prevalent in compassionate emotions, and she insists that a given society will in fact potentially become less hierarchical if it furthers compassion as a political emotion. However, it is her proposal of a “public culture of compassion” itself which threatens to establish hierarchies—both between the subject and the object of compassion as well as between those who decide to pursue Nussbaum’s vision and those who oppose this project.

Nussbaum purposefully refrains from using the term “pity” since, according to her, it has come to be regarded as establishing a hierarchy and superiority between the subject and the object of pity (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 301)<sup>6</sup>. In her proposal of a “public culture of compassion”, Nussbaum seems to refute the negative aspects associated with the emotion of compassion despite its inherent shortcomings such as its inclination to partiality. We might be tempted to disagree, since the first problem in Nussbaum’s account that threatens to reinforce a hierarchy lies with the connection between the emotion itself and its propensity to direct action: In that we feel pity, or are advised to feel it for others on a collective level, according to Arendt, the danger arises that we feel an (immediate) urge to help others, to rescue them, by

making politics *for* them, and not *with* them (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 180).

This, I believe, is a crucial critique on compassion/pity as a political emotion—one that cannot be discarded easily, at least not if we refrain from a paternalistic notion of politics. Compassion/pity thus threatens to establish a clear hierarchy between the subject and the object of this emotion. Even though Nussbaum carefully tries to avoid this hierarchy, nevertheless this danger seems to underlie the notion of “a painful emotion directed at the serious suffering of another creature or creatures”—especially so because Nussbaum does not consider the condition of “similar possibilities” as a necessary element for compassion (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 144). Compassion/pity may thus further the societal divide, rather than reduce it.

The second challenge regarding the relationship between Nussbaum’s proposal of a “public culture of compassion” and the pitfall of hierarchisation emerges on the metalevel: while Nussbaum rejects Rousseau’s theory of “civic love” for being “obedient” and “hierarchical” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 45), she maintains that, in her “project”, certain emotions such as compassion “conduce to *equal respect and toleration*” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 122, emphasis in original). Nussbaum insists that critical engagement and scrutiny with such a programmatic vision are necessary and need to be promoted actively (e.g., Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 389). Turning to John Stuart Mill and Rabindranath Tagore, Nussbaum is of the opinion that “a culture of sympathy and imagination is fully compatible with, and indeed can reinforce, a liberal culture of experimentation and dissent” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 105). However, Nussbaum does not offer satisfying answers as to how the opportunity for dissent and according political action should be incorporated into this particular visionary political and social culture.

Hence, the problem with Nussbaum’s proposal is that, if put into practice, it at least urges people to, and in worst cases might even be perceived as forcing people to feel compassion/pity. It might thus be regarded as inflicted ‘from above’ and thus fuel resentment of ‘the establishment’ and its policies which is currently prevalent. Nussbaum’s credo “[i]nvite, not coerce” (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 388) tries to address this conceptual challenge but does not convincingly abolish it. Since her normative approach of actively fostering compassion encompasses nearly all areas of that which Nussbaum subsumes under her wide definition of the political realm (Nussbaum, 2013, pp. 16–17), in effect, it will touch people’s lives on various levels. According to Degerman, in this case, consequences such as “compulsory education or the stigma of abnormality” would be conceivable (Degerman, 2016, p. 17). Hence, it is this all-encompassing dimension of her vision that is both attractive and normatively problematic.

The challenges to Nussbaum’s approach to foster a political culture of compassion will become clearer if we

<sup>6</sup> In fact, it might indeed have been Arendt’s political thought that had a role in maintaining this notion of the hierarchical relationship between the subject and the object of pity. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this insight.



again turn to Hannah Arendt's critical remarks on employing pity in the political realm: for Arendt, politics is necessarily a matter of dealing with the pluralistic. To her, pity, the "perversion" of the private passion of compassion into a public emotion, leads to the fact that this plurality of opinions and desires can become subdued by the one pressing issue that demands us to act immediately and in total unison (Arendt, 1963/2016, pp. 72–74). During the French Revolution, Arendt writes, this pressing issue was the abolishment of misery that was enforced in accordance with (her reading of) Rousseau's theory of the *volonté générale*, the "popular will" (Arendt, 1963/2016, pp. 70–74). Simon Swift has rightly pointed out that, in Arendt's interpretation, pity had thus served as a "grotesque alibi" (Swift, 2011, p. 84) for the revolutionaries' biopolitical agenda.

While agreeing in their refusal of the "dictatorial" nature of Rousseau's proposal of a "civil religion" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 5), the political context of Nussbaum's and Arendt's thoughts differ fundamentally. Nonetheless, I think we can take a valuable point from Arendt's verdict which can legitimately be transferred onto Nussbaum's theory: A (compassionate) "emotion programme" such as Nussbaum's might potentially clash with the pluralistic and diverse (political) interests of each individual. Hence, to some, the political demand to live in and actively shape a compassionate society can indeed resemble a totalising notion of inflicting a single political will in the shape of "rules of feeling" (Hochschild, 2016, p. 228) onto citizens who may not be provided with the ability to dissent, or to have their dissent heard and incorporated into political decision-making. Additionally, with Arendt, it could be argued that compassion/pity as a political end might hinder or disable the impetus for individual political judgment itself. Arendt's insistence on the plurality of political opinions and interests, as well as on the possibility to judge independently and act accordingly with others, thus clashes with an "emotion programme" that is introduced as an overriding political means, and, in a way, a political end as well (e.g., Nussbaum, 2013, p. 392). This clash seems to be inscribed in Nussbaum's vision in its totality.

In his analysis of Arendt's stance on emotions in politics, Dan Degerman pushes a similar point about the question of authenticity in Nussbaum's theory even further: "By reasserting Arendt's distinctions between the heart, the private, and the public in political discourse, we can protect the depth of the individual from collective colonization" (Degerman, 2016, p. 18). We might not go this far and resort to Arendt's overall protection of the political realm from emotions (and thus, to a certain degree, support her controversial differentiation between the private, the political, and the social, e.g., Benhabib, 1996, p. 155; most articles collected in Honig, 1995; von Tevenar, 2014, p. 38) in order to challenge Nussbaum's theory and its alleged gravitation towards "collective colonization". However, despite Nussbaum's best intentions to state the contrary, the underlying problem of an

"emotion programme" that enforces "feeling rules" and that potentially neglects diverse political and cultural attitudes certainly protrudes from the conceptual surface and demands to be addressed.

### 3.2. The "Magic" of Feeling Compassion/Pity

With Arendt, I would like to draw attention to a second major obstacle against Nussbaum's vision of a "public culture of compassion": the problem of the (self-deceptive) "magic" (Arendt, 1963/2016, p. 76) of feeling compassion/pity.

In *Upheavals of Thought* Nussbaum states:

People can all-too-easily feel that they have done something morally good because they have had an experience of compassion—without having to take any of the steps to change the world that might involve them in real difficulty and sacrifice....This does not mean that compassion by itself has bad tendencies; it means that people are frequently too weak to keep their attention fixed on a course of action and that a momentary experience is frequently much easier for them than a sustained commitment. This gives us reason to insist on going beyond compassion and to focus, as does Kant, on action and institutions. (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 399)

Hence, Nussbaum herself mentions a problematic side-effect of compassion—the exaltation of moral goodness that, paradoxically, might even prevent concrete action to alleviate the sufferer's pain: "When I feel compassion for a person who is suffering, I often *imagine* helping that person, and in many cases I do it" (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 22, emphasis added). This imagination can, in some cases, evolve into a powerful and lavish deception, a deception that defies reality and thus action that is designed to address this reality. Nussbaum's answer to this problem in *Political Emotions* is, on the one hand, to (rather vaguely) address and affirm the robustness of political institutions that serve as the necessary backbone of liberal politics. On the other hand, Nussbaum also strongly appeals to the emotional experience of a collective in order to actively further the political aim of social justice.

Even though Nussbaum seems to be aware of the problem of the specific "aura" of the lavish imagination of moral goodness that potentially threatens to encapsulate the subject of compassion, shield it from the harsh and "messy" reality of engaging with plural opinions, and potentially lead to inactivity, we cannot find any extensive problematisation of this pitfall in her account. Hence, it is helpful to turn to Arendt's deliberations again: According to Arendt, the good feeling of pity might indeed lure us into an "emotion-laden insensitivity to reality" (Arendt, 1963/2016, p. 85). In that we lavishly revel in compassionate emotions, in our mere fantasies of helping others, of acting for them (potentially

as subordinate others), Arendt shows us that we are in danger of losing touch with reality. This not only leads to self-deception (see Arendt's criticism on the emotional state of the romanticists such as the Jewish salonnière Rahel Varnhagen; Arendt, 1957/1997) but also serves as a predisposition for totalitarian rule—which, for Arendt, showed its precursors in the French Revolution. Arendt writes, the French revolutionaries, in the “boundlessness of their sentiments..., felt no compunctions in sacrificing” real people for “their ‘principles’” (Arendt, 1963/2016, p. 85). The reality of violence and suffering, according to Arendt, did not move the French revolutionaries, who were spellbound by the magic of the collective emotion they had actively evoked.

While Nussbaum's theory was of course designed to promote the opposite of violence and terror, and while her project succeeds for the most part in promoting communal, peaceful, and even “loving” cooperation, the underlying challenge of an “insensitivity to reality” due to the elated feeling of moral goodness and compassion is still a conceptual and also quite real threat that cannot easily be refuted when one studies Nussbaum's theory of emotions.

#### 4. The Pitfalls of “Love and Kindness”

In order to illustrate my theoretical reflections on the two substantial pitfalls of the strategic employment of compassion in the political realm, I would now like to turn to Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign video clips called “Love and Kindness”.

The first of the two one-minute video clips features almost ten close-ups of Clinton's encounters with African Americans. In one scene in the first video clip, Clinton holds a black child tightly and is depicted saying, presumably to his relatives, “We will need to make sure he gets a chance to...learn how to do that”. Also, females are distinctly featured in both video clips. The very first caption of the second video clip reads “For our daughters”, while the caption “For our sons” follows after being separated by a scene without a caption. It is thus obvious that the original aim of the campaign ads was (a) to address African American and female voters, and to state that (b) these two major groups of the US-American society were to be supported in their struggle for equal opportunities and social justice—through an explicit demand for compassion. This demand is verbalised in a scene in which Clinton says: “We have too much inequality everywhere that limits the potential for a lot of people”, and by the captions that accompany various scenes of Clinton on the campaign trail: “Let's break down barriers/So we can all rise together/Do all the good we can/In all the ways we can/For all the people we can/Let's protect each other/Let's support each other/Let's stand together”, they read in the first video ad, and, in the modified version of the second: “For our daughters/For our sons/For our country/Let's support each other/Be kind to each other/Lift each other up/together/Stronger together”.

It is in this explicit appeal to compassion as a political means and end that the *pitfall of a dual-level hierarchisation* is clearly recognisable. First, the scene of Clinton hugging the child displays a hierarchy between the (white) politician and the citizenry (of colour): from Clinton's statement “We will need to make sure he gets a chance to...learn how to do that” it is not clear whom Clinton designates as the “we”. This scene, then, alludes to the promotion of a politics *for*, instead of a politics designed to undertake *with*, either/both the boy as a signifier for Americans of colour or/and a subordinate citizenry itself. Interestingly, the image remained in the second video ad, but not Clinton's accompanying statement. Secondly, on the metalevel of a politics of compassion, the campaign videos clearly visualise a political programme of urging citizens to be (more) compassionate. The explicit appeal to compassion as a public principle to be striven for is combined with an obvious partisanship for African Americans and women.

In her sociological study of Tea Party members in Louisiana, *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016), Arlie Russell Hochschild records that, during the Obama administration, many Trump supporters and Tea Party members she spoke to had expressed resentment of the fact that they felt they were forced to sympathise with alleged “beneficiaries” of the welfare system, most notably with people of colour, when, really, they neither *felt* nor *wanted to feel* this forced compassion for people they perceived as “cutting the line” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 137). Reading Hochschild's emphatic study it becomes very clear that these (mostly white) Southern Tea Party members who, to a certain extent, seem to be representative of a larger group of Republican voters, regarded themselves as competing with people of colour, and, increasingly, with women, for the perceived sparse fruits of their hard labour. They found themselves in what they saw as a distribution battle that threatened their existence—both in terms of their wealth and their values. Politicians, especially non-Republicans, were perceived as promoting (their) exclusion for the sake of inclusion (of “the other”).

From Hochschild's study, it thus becomes clear that inclusion and the enforcement of social justice were regarded as the one single pressing political issue that her interviewees rejected (often along underlying racial and gendered divisions). Hence, the call for more compassion towards others such as the one depicted in Clinton's “Love and Kindness” ads would have certainly been perceived both as a totalising notion of inflicting “politically correct rules of feeling” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 228) onto them that they absolutely rejected and, ultimately, as an obstacle to their own flourishing.

During his run for the presidency, Donald Trump created an emotional cloud that was explicitly directed against these perceived “feeling rules” and political correctness. The “high” of enthusiasm (Hochschild, 2016, p. 228) that Trump's candidacy created has so far led to a substantial neglect of (legal) reality and facts to an

unknown degree. However, shifting the analysis from Trump to Clinton means that we acknowledge that Clinton and her campaign team, too, sought to create a specific emotional atmosphere for her campaign, and beyond. Thus, the second potential pitfall of a politics of compassion that I have identified above, the “*magic of feeling compassion/pity that might lead to deception and an insensitivity to reality*,” can also be illustrated quite fittingly by the two campaign videos: accompanied by lots of musical *pathos*—the soul singer Andra Day’s lyrics “Spread a little hope and love now/We will walk it out together now”—, particularly in the 60 seconds of the older campaign ad Clinton is continuously depicted smiling, hugging, embracing, exchanging high-fives, listening to citizens and their stories, appearing to be *moved* by others and their stories, offering verbal and non-verbal support. On reflection, the lavishly exhibited display of an appeal to compassion, kindness, solidarity, and public “love” might have led pre-inclined viewers to revel in the powerful *pathos* and utopia of a compassionate society. This specific mood might have intensified in contrast to Donald Trump’s addressing of anger, fear, and aggression.

The contrast between the Democrat’s display of an emotional revelling in altruistic feelings and the emotional state of the specific group of US-American voters that Hochschild portrays could not have been much bigger. If we again turn to Hochschild’s study, we are presented with portraits of citizens who, instead of being willing to extend their compassion towards others and offer their share to act accordingly, felt that their own lot had been governed by the harsh reality of a life somehow gone downhill. Hochschild’s interviewees perceived a cultural shift experienced as foreign and false that made them feel instead as “strangers in their own land” (Hochschild, 2016). It is against this backdrop that Trump, instead of a (female connoted) “public culture of compassion”, proposed a (masculine) vision of a “greater” America and a better future for those who felt “left behind”. As Amy Skonieczny (2018) also argues in this issue, Trump’s explicit and calculated appeal to those mourning a “bygone America” (p. 71) was accompanied by a simultaneous proposition to blame and exclude “the other” (p. 63), which fell on fruitful ground.

Paradoxically, Hochschild’s study shows that many of the people she portrayed regarded themselves as very compassionate, often acting as such, yet only towards those perceived as near and dear, and as “entitled” to support. The interviewees did not want an intrusive government urging them towards a more compassionate life, which they believed they were already living. Instead, they wanted light-touch governance to secure the promise of the American Dream by (re-)turning to political deregulation. In seeking to have this promise come true, they had to endure man-made catastrophes, pollution, and the deterioration of their health. “They were victims without a language of victimhood”, Hochschild (2016, p. 131) emphasises. Interestingly, her interviewees seem to have been torn between the desire to demand compas-

sion directed towards themselves and a disdain for exactly this kind of appeal (Hochschild, 2016, pp. 144–145).

It is this reality, the complexity of and the rift between the collective emotional states of US-American voters that Clinton’s campaign ads do not seem to have been able to represent or address adequately. The overriding tone of the two campaign ads conveys an opulence in the promotion of compassion, a moral ‘high-ground’ of altruism for certain groups of the population, but not all, which apparently was not able to serve as a soundboard given the nation’s great societal divide.

## 5. Conclusion

Both a look at Hannah Arendt’s warnings against employing pity as a political emotion and at a fitting illustration of the attempt to utilise compassion as a political means and a political end in current politics—Hillary Clinton’s election campaign videos—have provided us with relevant challenges to Nussbaum’s ideal of a “public culture of compassion”. Indeed, the very aspect Nussbaum so vehemently wants to overcome with her project—societal divisions due to hierarchies—nevertheless seems to crop up as part of the attempt to implement her normative vision. Furthermore, such a theoretical project might even threaten to border on a sort of Arendtian totalising notion of a “popular will” of a political collective, with compassion serving both as political means and end. This is a valid challenge to a democratic idea of a “public culture of compassion”, one that might not easily be discarded by Nussbaum’s rather unelaborated remarks on the notion that possibilities of dissent to such undertaking necessarily have to be provided for.

A rigorous “public culture of compassion” might indeed become at risk of suppressing plurality and plural (political) opinions at a certain point, by establishing hierarchical obstacles both in the relationship between the subject and the object of compassion/pity itself, and in the subject and the object of a political agenda of compassionate emotions. Hence, we should keep in mind that the utilisation of emotions in politics inevitably contributes to certain practices of power (e.g., Illouz, 2007) which are also, to a certain extent, prone to exclusion and even violence. Furthermore, Arendt cautions that pity serving as the heart of a political agenda demands that, logically, an object of pity *must* always be given: “Without the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist” (Arendt, 1963/2016, p. 84). Theoretically, misfortune might thus be perpetuated, or even aggravated, in order to ensure that the political agenda of striving towards a collective emotion of compassion/pity continues to have a legitimate object.

Additionally, the specific “aura” that the attempt to invoke compassion/pity as political means and/or end can create may run counter to the subjective experience and the (more objective) givenness of reality. This is precisely that which Arendt has stressed throughout her unsystematic “theory of emotions”—that emotions in gen-



eral, and especially pity, create a “magic” feeling of being thus immersed in the respective emotion that reality becomes blurred. A “public culture of compassion” can thus impede its own aim of inclusion by furthering societal and political divides vertically and horizontally, providing obstacles to representation and thus, eventually, threaten the very essence of democratic practices.

All this is not to say, however, that Arendt’s overall rejection of allowing pity to come into play in politics should not be equally criticised (e.g., von Tevenar, 2014; Whitebrook, 2014)—despite their difficulties and ambivalences (see also Pedwell, 2014) compassionate emotions perform vital functions in societies and politics. Thus, Nussbaum has not only rightly argued that a politics of compassion should be furthered to grant more justice and equality, but also, among others, Joan C. Tronto (1993/2009) and Elisabeth Porter (2006), who have established links between a politics of compassion with a very necessary politics of care.

Additionally, my aim was not to claim that Nussbaum’s overall vision of a “public culture of compassion” should be refuted. On the contrary—we can draw from Nussbaum’s theory the idea that there is a certain appeal, a beauty even, to the “emotion-driven politics” of compassion/pity if employed with decent motives and monitoring. With Nussbaum’s account, we are convincingly tempted to counter exclusionary tendencies with compassion and a more utopian vision of the “good life” that can be created for one another in a communal space, both in theory and in practice. And, indeed, if one consults *Strangers in their Own Land*, one is inclined to agree with Arlie Hochschild that what is needed is the demolition of “empathy walls” (e.g., Hochschild, 2016, p. 5) and greater effort to understand “the other”. Hochschild reports that many of those who supported the Tea Party movement, and very likely Trump as president, were compassionate neighbours and churchgoers. What is needed here, it seems, is in fact not the abolishment of compassion in our public life but the enlargement of our respective circles of concern (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 11)—as well as a resolute fight against prevailing societal sexism and racism.

Nussbaum’s rather fascinating normative approach can hence provide us with very engaging ideas for a specific political agenda that is, in many ways, very different from the one that we see prevalent in Donald Trump’s presidency, or in the many excesses of right-wing populism that have cropped up in many parts in Europe. Arendt’s theoretical warnings and Clinton’s practical example, however, have made it clear that there are some major challenges that must be addressed in further theoretical reflections on a “public culture of compassion”, especially in such politically charged times of upheaval.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

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